

Fourth Sunday In Advent, A
Isaiah 7:10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

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In this season we often focus on Mary, mother of Jesus, and her willingness to bear a miracle child. But how often do we think of Joseph, the man who became an ally in God's plan to save creation? Today's scripture invites us to receive Joseph as an inspiration. He was willing to have God turn his life upside down in order to heal the world.

The Bible says Joseph was a righteous man who took God's laws to heart. But when his fiancée became pregnant -- without his help -- all Joseph's careful plans were thrown into turmoil. What should a faithful person do? There was no good answer. The law gave Joseph all the power. He could have Mary tried for adultery, even have her stoned to death. He literally held Mary's life, and her baby's life, in his hands. But Joseph chose mercy over violence. At first he decided to "dismiss Mary quietly" to raise her baby all alone. But it seems Joseph was still losing sleep over this weighty decision, still tossing and turning, when his turmoil was interrupted by an angel in a dream.

Joseph heard the angel say "Don't be afraid," and he believed. He opened his mind and heart. He became an ally with Mary to create a family where God's Son could grow up in safety and love. Joseph did it because he perceived God's presence in an unexpected and difficult situation. Joseph trusted God's power to save.

Long ago, the Christ child was born into the midst of turmoil. And this is how Jesus always comes -- into the midst of turmoil. Jesus comes to people who are confused and facing situations where answers aren't obvious. Jesus comes to people of goodwill who can't quite see the next step and need God's gift of hope. Jesus comes to you and me, when we toss and turn at night, when best-laid plans are overturned, when it could very well be our loving God who is overturning human plans for the sake of a greater, saving, healing good. Jesus comes to center our spirits in God's way of love and justice. Jesus comes to encourage us -- to grant us courage -- to trust God's voice and follow in God's way of mercy and peace.

This promise speaks across the generations and the centuries. In the late 1600's, Dietrich Buxtehude was an influential organist and church music director in Lübeck, Germany. During the season of Advent, crowds of people would come to church in the dark of evening for concerts performed by candlelight. They would travel through the shadows of night, bringing with them their confusion and fears and hopes, seeking a

word of holy encouragement. The music they heard, and we are about to hear, speaks God's shining promise of a "Newborn Infant Child" – the Son of God – born into the turmoil of human life to dispel doubt, allay fear and comfort grief. To make us one with God forever.

CANTATA "The Newborn Infant Child" by Dietrich Buxtehude

The angel in Joseph's dream revealed a special name for the holy baby: "Immanuel" – which means "God is with us." The name is special to this congregation because it's our name, chosen well over a century ago by Swedish immigrants who started this church.

We don't know why they chose it, but it's a good name, *Immanuel*. "God is with us," they could say to one another in lonely times when they were homesick for the land they'd left behind. "God is with us," they could say, when they had trouble making ends meet. "God is with us," they could say when they tried new things. God will help us, God will give us courage, "God is with us."

Because of Jesus' birth, we say it too: "God is with us." Our lives are filled with the gift of Jesus. The gift of comfort and joy. The gift of hope. The gift of God alive to inspire, uphold, and guide us still today.

God could have given up on human beings a thousand times, but God did not give up. Instead God made the beautiful choice to come near and join us in person. To be born as a fellow traveler on earth – God with us. A brother. A teacher. To show us what love looks like, in the flesh. Christ welcomed outsiders, he brought forgiveness, he gave us eternal life. And when he had completed his time on earth, our Savior's beautiful parting words were these: "I am with you always"... "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The gift of "God with us" begins at Christmas, in the birth of the holy child. The music we are about to hear celebrates Christ's birth through a blend of traditional English carols, arranged to convey God's sacred promise. Gustav Holst composed this cantata in 1910 to be sung by the choir of Morley College in London. It is striking not only for its joyful tone, but for the deep sense of comfort and hope this music communicates. The comfort each one of us seeks, the comfort that anchors God's people in everlasting hope. The comfort that God is with us. The comfort that is expressed most poignantly in the closing passages of this piece: *Christ was born to save*.

CANTATA "Christmas Day" by Gustav Holst

Christmas blessings to each of you. Amen.